ECUMENICAL SERVICE
DECEMBER 31, 1999
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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

How good it is to be here together. I can't think of any place I'd rather be

I'm grateful to our friend, and neighbor and brother in Christ, Cardinal George, for his gracious willingness to be here and to share his reflection and insights on this occasion. The fact that he and we choose to end a century and begin a new one ecumenically is stunning, and I am deeply touched and deeply grateful.

I am also grateful to a very good friend and colleague in ministry, Father Robert McLaughlin, man of great faith and hope who, with me, actually hopes that sometime in the 21st century the World Series will be played at Wrigley Field, pastor of Holy Name Cathedral, who with our own John Wilkinson, Associate Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church, had a vision for this ecumenical witness and carefully planned the service. Everybody knows that the laity is ahead of church authorities when it comes to ecumenism. And so Holy Name and Fourth Presbyterian share a kind of moveable ecumenical congregation, a small but hearty group of souls who identify with both of us, attend worship and mass - sometimes both on the same Sunday, and who are "Catholic Presbyterians" or "Presbyterian Catholics" and who, even though we're not quite sure what to do with them, just may be showing us a new way to be Christian. Thanks be to God that neither of the churches is nearly as confident as we used to be that such behavior was not only unacceptable but dangerous for the health of your soul and prospects for salvation.

And thank you for your decision to be here this evening and not somewhere else. There is no poverty of alternatives. You could have been on a cruise ship crossing the international dateline at midnight and then doubling back to celebrate the Millenium twice at a cost of $100,000. Or you could be on the Concorde winging your way around the world for $75,000.

I'm glad you're here and you will be too in the morning, considering those prices. Actually 72% of us have decided to stay home and take a pass on the big bash. It even has a name - Y2Kocooning. Trend analyst, Faith Popcorn - who created the concept of cocooning says "many are opting not to go to the big party. They're staying at home hiding under their beds, playing with their cats or dogs or children, and wishing it was 1954" (See *Time*, 11/29/99).

1000 years ago, on the last day of the year 999, the old Basilica of St. Peter's in Rome was thronged with a mass of weeping and trembling worshippers awaiting the end of the world - the dreaded "day of wrath" when the earth-would dissolve in ashes. Pope Sylvester II, a wise man of great learning and sophistication, who did not share his flock's terror, celebrated a midnight mass for a worried throng, some wearing sackcloth and ashes in penance for their sins, who believed that judgement day was nigh. In fact, a church

council, before his papacy, had predicted the end of history, literally, at the end of the Millenium. (*Wall Street Journal*, 12/21/99 George Melloan, *A Lot Has Changed Since 1000, But Not Everything*).

100 years ago, December 31, 1899, the same thing happened. People took out full page ads in Chicago newspapers anticipating the second coming of Jesus Christ and the end of the world.

Some scientists were predicting that as the clock struck midnight the sun would become solid and go out, leaving the solar system in darkness and the earth a lifeless ice ball. (See *Time* 1/11/99)

Harvard's Harvey Cox, looking back over the 20th century, points out that Marxists were widely confident that they had seen the beginning of the end of religion, and at the other end of the spectrum, a group of progressive Protestants here in Chicago organized a new magazine and called it *The Christian Century*. Neither prediction came true, Cox observes.

In fact, for what it's worth Y2K has already come:

- at 5:00 a.m. this morning in New Zealand, and the news assured us that the lights and ATM machines were working.
- at 9:00 a.m. in Japan
- at 10:00 a.m. China, where airline executives were required to be in planes, in flight to show how Y2K ready they are.
- 12:30 p.m. - India
- 6:00 p.m. - Britain

A columnist for the *Wall Street Journal* editorialized a week ago "Probably we will escape once more. Just as those Christians of New Year's 1000 ran out into the streets of Rome and celebrated still being alive, probably we will find out with joy and relief that all the wonders science has created are still in working order."

I look to the past this evening in gratitude. My father told me one time that he wanted to live long enough to see it - see the 21st Century. He didn't, but I did and I'm grateful for him tonight and for the gift of being alive at this extraordinary moment.

I'm grateful for history: for those who preceded us - our families, our civic leaders who built this city strong and vital and hopeful. For people who believed deeply and gave their lives to the church - this church, Holy Name Cathedral - all the churches.

And as the calendar changes and we learn to say 2000 instead of 1999 - I'm grateful for the Christian content of those 1000 years. Martin Marty published a Millennial Balance Sheet, analyzing Christian faith's contribution to history.

From a small band of followers 2000 years ago we have grown to 2.2 billion adherents, 33% of the world's population. Our record is a long way from perfection.

As dominators and rulers we have been no better or worse than Muslims, Buddhists or Hindus. "The record of Holy Wars, Jihads and Human Sacrifice is ecumenical" Marty observes.

But the good news is that Christian faith has given very significant gifts to the world: modern liberty, for instance.

- The modern concept of liberty is from Catholic notions of human dignity and the Protestant impulse for freedom of conscience.
- An artistic heritage, without which Western Civilization is not conceivable, from Gregorian Chant to J.S. Bach, from Boticelli to Michelangelo
- Healing Influence. In the year 1000 the only healing institutions in England were Monastery Infirmities(?) where the infirm and old were welcome and cared for. Throughout the world, current health care systems grew from 19th century missionary hospitals in Korea, Thailand, Zaire, Zimbabwe.
- The Liberation of the Mind. The only schools in England in 1000 were in the monasteries. Christian faith gave the western world all the first universities and organized the vast majority of colleges and universities in the New World.
- Martyrs and Mystics from Frances of Assisi to Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Martin Luther King, Jr. to Mother Teresa.
- Notions of justice and mercy, which sooner or later hold the body politic to account for civil rights, equal justice, health care and education for all.

I'm grateful for that as one Millenium evolves into another.

And as we look forward, I do so with confidence and hope, but also a sense of vocation and duty.

Unfortunately, most of the public religious rhetoric about the Millenium has been the same genre as the "dread of the end" which surfaced 1000 and 100 years ago.

My friend Joanna Adams said recently that the world is loaded with millenialists drooling over the prospect of the end of the world and it can't come too soon for them. Joanna tells about seeing a sign in front of a bait shop on a country road in Georgia. "Smile, Your God is a consuming fire." "That is not a thought that puts a smile on my face," she quipped. (See 11/29/99 *The End of History as We Know It*, a sermon.)

That kind of apocalypticism has been part of our tradition for 2000 years. But tonight, looking forward, let it be said here that this overwhelming testimony of our scripture, and our tradition and our experience, is that God loves the world. God loves the world so much that God sent God's only son - not to condemn the world, but to save the world. Of course, history doesn't always reflect God's love and of course we human beings regularly disappoint and confound our creator. But let it be said, in confidence this evening, that our God is a God of love, that God's judgement is an expression of God's love. Let it be said here, that far more important to Christians than the millenium, is the event we celebrated a week ago - the birth of a baby in Bethlehem, the birth of God's love and mercy and grace into our history.

And as we look forward, let us do so in gratitude for the diversity and pluralism in which we live and which will intensify in the future. The challenge before us, Catholics and Protestants, is to hold on to our truth claims with integrity - but also respect those whose truth claims are different, and who hold on to theirs with as much tenacity and commitment, as we hold ours. We Protestants and Catholics are no longer the whole show. So let us live into the future with a new openness to one another and a new openness to the possibility that diversity is a gift of God to be embraced, not overcome, and that this multi-colored, multi-faithful emerging society just may be part of God's will for creation.

And let us live into the future ecumenically. This service would not and could not have happened 100 years ago, or even 40 years ago. There were wonderful exceptions, but many of us here this evening were taught to eye one another suspiciously, to regard one another as somehow less than fully Christian, and our church something less than the church of Jesus Christ. Some of us were taught that to worship together, to enter one another's places of worship was sinful. This service would not have happened 100 years ago. But thanks be to God, it is happening tonight.

When Cardinal George preached from this pulpit on February 15, 1998, he graciously agreed to meet over lunch with some of the leaders of this congregation and to respond to questions. Someone asked him what he thought the future held for ecumenical relations between Catholics and Protestants - I will never forget his answer.

He said it is helpful to remember that no one in the Vatican in the year 1515, could have predicted or imagined what the church would look like in just 10 years. What happened in that interval, of course, was the Protestant Reformation.

It was a gracious reminder to Protestants from a Roman Catholic Archbishop that we may be responsible for our behavior in the future - but we do not control history. There is another player, one who says:

> "Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it."

In the exciting world of the Third Millenium, 21st Century, year 2000, I believe God is calling us to perceive a new creation, to follow with courage and boldness, to be open to new possibilities, new forms of the church, new mission, new responsibilities in the city and world to be embraced together. I think God is calling us to stop living out of the past and to begin living into the future, to acknowledge, for instance, that in this newly pluralistic, diverse world, old categories are not very important any more, and that what once defined us as Catholic and Protestant is not nearly as important as our common faith in Jesus Christ and our common commitment to be his people in the days ahead.

That is an exciting prospect and I'm grateful to begin it here, together, tonight.

Thanks be to God.

Fourth Presbyterian Church
New Year's Eve, 1999

In the beginning, God created time itself by separating light from darkness and establishing a rhythm of alternation between them. But this cycle is only the occasion for our personal sense of time. What brings each of us light, what are the moments of brilliance which light our way? What are the signposts in the field of time which define our life - the events and anniversaries that shape our lives, personally and together?

In the beginning, with God is the eternal word, his Son, who, in the fullness of time was born of the Virgin Mary. Jesus, Son of David, the archangel Gabriel calls him when speaking to his mother. Savior we name him in the recesses of our hearts. Light from Light, we call him in the Nicene Creed, with words which have echoed through the last two millennia.

At the end of time, this Jesus will return in glory to judge the living and the dead. Then there will be only light, and time will cease. In the meantime, our time, this time marked by the anniversary of Jesus' birth, we begin a year of Jubilee, a year to walk with God, so that time will be shaped by eternity, so that our time may be flooded with light.

At this time, I thank pastor John Buchanan and the ministers and people of Fourth Presbyterian Church for the invitation to be together in praise of God as we begin a new millennium. If our time is to be a time of grace, then we must together search for light along the way, together walk with the Lord in the light he gives us as his disciples. We thank God together tonight for the light of life given each of us as pure gift, without our asking. We thank God together tonight for the light of new life given us in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. We thank God together tonight for the promise of eternal life in his heavenly kingdom. Made conscious of the passage of time by this New Year, the beginning of a new century and a new millennium, we are made conscious as well of the light and darkness that mark our lives; we are made conscious of how we spend the time that is God's gift to us; we are made conscious of the promise of a new millennium.

As we strain to look toward the future, what can we see? With the light of reason, we note the much discussed phenomenon of globalization. Many fear the closer integration of the economic and political and cultural structures of the world, for the experience of many millennia has been that some are always ground up in the crunch that benefits others, some are left out of the opportunities and wealth that new organization brings. In the past, in a less than global society, there was always a way out, a new country to immigrate to, a new opening not yet exploited in a conceptual space still unfilled. This country, because it was for many years a world apart, was built on the promise of freedom and opportunity, and the promise has been fulfilled for many, but not for all. There is reason to fear that the globe might now become a prison for many of its inhabitants, with no space left, no way out.

But there is also reason to hope. A globalization created with attention to solidarity among peoples, a globalization effected with the recognition that we are not all the same but we are all brothers and sisters, would be a unification which brings new life to the human race. To see by this light, however, more than reason is needed - we need the light of a faith that

tells us love is stronger than death, that life is not measured by our own limitations, that time is not an endless trap of cycles, but an entry to eternity. We need to see with the eyes of a genuinely universal love, and order our lives to act on it.

That universal love is made visible in an unexpected way in the child Jesus. Our plans, our schemes, our hopes, our dreams are irreversibly altered by faith in Jesus Christ. We would not have planned things this way. But if an eternal and infinite love is to enter time and transform it, how else could God have acted? The power of strength we acknowledge easily; the power of weakness is not of our making. Of our making at this time is the commercialization of life and the trivialization of sexuality, the violence that still threatens very ordinary activities and the fear that prevents trust among us. But these patches of darkness are relieved by Light from Light. Because God has acted within the time he himself created, we, God's creatures, can see beyond time and we can hope beyond our own horizons.

A pause between one millennium and another brings us to the threshold of eternity. But eternity erupts in time whenever we welcome light - each day, each night. T. S. Eliot said it well in Four Quartets:

> At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
> Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
> but neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
> Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
> Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
> There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

No believer in God, no disciple of Jesus Christ, dances alone. For that we thank God together this evening and we look in hope to the coming of a new age of grace and hope and love.

Francis Cardinal George

New Year's Eve Ecumenical Prayer Service
December 31, 1999
7:30 p.m.

Prayers of the People
The Reverend John Wilkinson

Eternal God, God of eternity and God of every moment, on a night that lies between ending and beginning, we thank you that in the beginning your word called creation into being out of love and that your word redeems creation with grace and truth. We acknowledge the significance of this moment, this millennium moment, even as we acknowledge the import of each second of each minute of each day and decade and generation and century as gifts from you, transforming gifts, invitations to receive your mercy with gratitude and to share your good news with a world in need. How might we mark this moment, gracious God? How might we re-commit ourselves to the vision of human family you so cherish?

How might we hear again ancient words of justice and righteousness and bring them to bear on this world, this new day? How might we sing the new song of community and neighborhood, your beloved city of shalom, made alive to us through the promise of a carpenter? How might your creation say praise and thanks and joy and awe and grace and love and life? And so with words never adequate, we say thank you for ages past, for faithful ones who have gone before us, that great could of witnesses, saints and apostles, martyrs and pioneers, grandmothers and grandfathers, teachers and preachers, who captured the essence of your good news and lived it out, those who paid the costly price of discipleship. May we have their integrity and hopefulness as faith calls us to new duties this day.

We would pray for the church, the church of Christ in every age, the church of Christ here and now. For moments when we have neglected your call, stood as obstacles to your good news, we ask your forgiveness. We pray for ministries of teaching and healing, of proclaiming, of outreach and reconciliation, ministries that seek unity within our diversity. Be with church leaders and members, with believers and doubters, all who carry the rich tapestry of stores to share, experiences to celebrate, gifts to offer. Make the church bold to challenge injustice, that, like the one whose name it carries, it may be poised always to take up the cross of freedom and hope for the sake of the world. We pray for all cities, for towns and hamlets around the world, for the global village, for this great city.

We pray for teachers and lawmakers, for laborers and restaurant workers, for scientists and custodians, for secretaries and doctors. Bind us up one with another in our journeys and in our vocations, as we seek the health and vitality and welfare of the city. In special ways this night be with those whose days are numbered, by age or illness, and grant them your healing presence, even as you prepare a home for them. And help us to prepare a happy home for our children, for all the children of the city, your most precious gift and our fondest hope. For this night is about them, the promise of the future. Loving God, as the clock ticks away, as the pages of the calendar stand ready to turn, we gather in this place, in prayer and song, to seek your blessing. We offer our celebrations, our journeys, our hopes and fears, our relationships, our work, our very lives to you, to your grace, to your love.

Fill our future with hope, the hope of years to come, lived in the light of your covenant. For we pray in the name of the bright morning star, come to us as the Prince of Peace, even Jesus Christ our Lord, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Amen.